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SUBJECT: FM KUSA: "STEP BY STEP" APPROACH TO VISA FOR AMERICANS

¶1. (SBU) During a June 21 meeting with FM Musa Kusa, Ambassador noted that the U.S. had begun full visa operations for Libyans in Tripoli and had already issued over 800 non-immigrant visas to Libyans with limited wait times. By contrast, the GOL still followed a restrictive visa policy when it came to Americans, including an apparent ban on American tourists, lengthy delays and high fees for American business people, and a long record of visa denials for USG-sponsored cultural and academic visitors. Now that the US and Libya had restored bilateral relations, the USG expected to see greater reciprocity in visa policy.

¶2. (SBU) Kusa acknowledged that US visa policy was generous with respect to most Libyans, although there had been delays in the cases of certain Libyan officials. He said the GOL had opened the door to American business people, investors and employees of US oil and gas companies. These applicants often received multiple entry visas, he noted (in contrast to the US's more limited single-entry visas for Libyan business people). To the extent there were delays, it was due to the small consular section in the Libyan Embassy in Washington. When the Ambassador pointed out that the US Embassy continued to hear stories of extortionate fees being demanded of US business people by Libyan middle-men, Kusa said he was aware of the problem, which he characterized as "corruption," and was trying to stamp it out. The Ambassador also noted there were other obstacles, both bureaucratic and personnel, that may also be contributing to an apparent virtual standstill in visa issuance for Americans. He asked Kusa to look into these as well.

¶3. (SBU) As for American tourists, Kusa said Libya's restrictive policy was security-related. He recounted a time two years ago when a cruise ship with several hundred Americans onboard had attempted to unload the passengers in the eastern Libyan town of Darna, the locus of foreign fighters heading to Iraq. As head of Libya's security organization at the time, he immediately ordered the ship not to let the Americans disembark, given the presence of so many extremists in the town. His point, he said, was that Americans remained vulnerable to attack by extremists, due to controversial US policies over the past several years. He was also concerned about "adventure tourists" who wanted to explore Libya's deserts. Sometimes these people got lost; so far none had been kidnapped, as had occurred in neighboring countries. The GOL, he said, was still looking for two missing foreigners -- Italian and Japanese -- who disappeared in the desert during a motorcycle expedition.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador asked why the GOL could not at least treat Americans as they do Europeans and allow tourists to come either in groups or in connection with organized tours by authorized Libyan tour companies. Kusa dismissed this idea, saying that Americans remained a more attractive target for terrorists than Europeans. Under the Obama Administration, Kusa said, he expected attitudes toward Americans to eventually

improve, especially if progress could be made in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Consequently, in his view, opening up Libya to increasing numbers of American visitors had to be a "step by step" process.

¶5. (SBU) On USG-sponsored exchange visitors and on other non-responses to requests, Kusa agreed to review the situation. Ambassador offered to provide a list of visa denials in these cases.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: We find Kusa's justification for the total ban on American tourists to be unconvincing. A few years ago, Libya did in fact briefly permit Americans to visit Libya, provided they came as part of an organized tour or aboard a cruise ship. In these cases, the GOL has advance notification of the visit itinerary and can provide appropriate security, as it does in the case of European and other visitors. We will need to continue to test his assertions regarding Libya's "open doors" to American business visitors, and to assist the GOL to weed out corrupt middle-men by providing information on such practices to the GOL as it becomes available. On USG-sponsored exchange visitors, we will follow up by providing the MFA with our long list of aborted visits and attempt to determine whether this is a policy decision or the work of lower-level personnel who oppose U.S. engagement with Libyans in Libya. The good news here is continued GOL interest in U.S. visas and a commitment to look into the problematic issues we raised regarding lack of visa issuance. We will now press the MFA to make good on its commitment to establish an interagency working group to discuss these issues with us.

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